

Document: ISO/IEC JTC1/SC2/WG2 N2096
Related documents: N1944
Status: Expert review
Source: Prof. Dr. Schenkel through DIN
Distribution: Members of WG2

Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen
Institute for Egyptology
Prof. Dr. Schenkel
Translation from German: Marc Wilhelm Küster

Comments on the question of encoding Egyptian hieroglyphs in the UCS

Presentation of the argument

While the encoding of Egyptian hieroglyphs within Unicode is worth looking into in principle, it is for the following reasons not yet ripe for decision at this point in time:

- 1.) All lists of hieroglyphic »characters« that are in use today are directly or conceptionally derived from registers of printing types. Lead types were created to cater for specific practical needs, often therefore without thorough systematic stock-taking of those characters occurring on Egyptian monuments (statues, tombs).
- 2.) The most thoroughly worked through directory is Gardiner's list of types, on which the Standard Library that is being taken into consideration for a standardization is based on. In this list of types, there is on the one hand a basis of hieroglyphs that more or less has to be listed in any usable register of types, but on the other hand it also contains rare characters and palaeographic variants which were selected more or less at random. Any list of characters, that aimed to contain only those characters that belong to the classical hieroglyphic script in the most general sense, would have to include at least twice as many hieroglyphs as the Standard Library. Such a list does not yet exist, but is being worked on. (See also 5.)
- 3.) The Extended Library is a list which is even less complete and elaborated than the Standard Library. In this list it is even less clear than in Standard Library, whether a glyph represents a character in the sense of a unit of information or a palaeographic variant — a glyph variant in UCS terminology. This list especially takes into account the immensely expanded repertoire of »characters« of the latest, Ptolemaic-Roman period, without exhaustively covering all of them and without sorting this stock according to systematical aspects.
- 4.) Almost none of the numerous types from the Early Egyptian period, which were no longer used after that, are listed in general registers. These types are catalogued in Jochen Kahl, *Das System der ägyptischen Hieroglyphenschrift in der 0.–3. Dynastie*, Wiesbaden 1994 (*The system of Egyptian hieroglyphic script letters in the 0–3rd dynasty*). This register is not complete either, as new characters are continually being discovered and the categorization of these new characters is often unstable. However, these special difficulties of early written language do not necessarily hinder the standardization of letter repertoire from later periods. The letters from early periods are a more or less marginal problem.
- 5.) A new extensive but condensed list of characters (»handlist«) of — in a most general sense — classical hieroglyphic script is being worked on by Prof. Dr. Erik Hornung, Basel. This list will be much bigger than the Gardiner repertoire of types or the Standard Library. Judging from the

parts of this list that have been communicated to me personally, it would be much more appropriate as a basis for a standardization than those printing type derived lists already in existence. Here it is at least being attempted to list the complete stock of the — in the most general sense — classical hieroglyphic script, and at the same time to determine the functions of these characters and thus to get a better hold of the palaeographic variants.

- 6.) At the present stage of research in Egyptian hieroglyphic script, one always has to expect new characters and changes in what we currently perceive to be an abstract character. This means that the clumsy instrument of standardization cannot meet the demands of the incomplete stage of research in Egyptology. A far more appropriate means would be fonts registered by Egyptologists, which can be very quickly expanded and modified within the science itself, as is the case with the directories of the Standard and the Extended Library that Hans van den Berg, Utrecht, is running within the framework of the program for printing hieroglyphs »Glyph« (please note the name). Only after the repertoires will have stabilized within Egyptology itself, further steps can be sensible.

Summary

If, inspite of what was said in 6., a standardization of hieroglyphic character repertoire should be considered, then in any case the publication of the new list of characters by Hornung (mentioned under 5.) should be waited for. Whether this list of characters can actually serve as a basis for a standardization remains to be examined when it is published. At this point in time and on the basis of registers of hieroglyphs currently available a standardization within Unicode cannot be recommended.